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Empowerment in Sustainability

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Definition

Social development and participation are essential components for sustainable development. Participation has been seen as a way to train people, thereby fostering empowerment and bringing more satisfaction. Thus, the success of participation means empowerment, which obviously contributes to social sustainability, an essential component in the search for more sustainable societies (Lyons et al. 2001).

Introduction

Data from the United Nations indicate that 80% of the participants in ecological activism are women. It may be related to the feminist movement, which since the 1970s has defended the idea that the natural environment is feminine and, for this reason, protection of the environment would be linked to the emancipation of women and their greater influence on local and global development (Camargo and Fontoura 2014).

The condition for modern society to achieve a more sustainable way of thinking about its development is related to the view of equity in social relations between genders, developed by mankind (Couto and Wivaldo 2017).

In this sense, it is worth emphasizing that sustainable development strives for a balance between social, economic, and environmental factors. From the social point of view, empowerment becomes a key element for the transformation of the current system which, besides generating environmental impacts at different scales affecting the life quality of human beings, is also marked by inequalities, vulnerability, exclusion, and discrimination.

Briefly, the process of empowerment necessarily implies social transformation. Therefore, the first step is the subject's awareness of his role as a transforming agent and the recognition of his disempowerment (Fonseca et al. 2017).

Couto and Wivaldo (2017) point out women as essential factors in the practice of actions to promote gender equality, which aim at fairer relations of work for women, as well as strategies aimed at the full development of the feminine gender. This emancipatory performance is part of the discussions related to the perspective of sustainability and to the ideological and behavioral change of society.

In this context, this work presents a reflection about the relationship of empowerment of women and sustainability, seeking to highlight that the search for sustainability goes beyond proposals based on the conservation of natural resources or the search for more ecologically correct economic alternatives.

Women's Empowerment and Sustainability

Throughout history, domination is present in societies in different forms. The study of this characteristic, present in the development of humanity, has assumed centrality in the fields of education and politics, when questioning the possibility of emancipation of the human being. In this discussion, one of the central themes refers to the empowerment of individuals, individually and collectively (Baquero 2012).

Empowerment seeks alternatives to the social reality marked by inequalities, vulnerability, exclusion, and discrimination, being a phenomenon that is prominent both in academic circles and in the activities of development agencies and social projects (Barreto and Paula 2012).

From the historical point of view, according to Baquero (2012), the tradition of empowerment has its roots in the Protestant Reformation, initiated by Luther in the sixteenth century in Europe, in a movement of protagonism in the struggle for social justice. Thus, although the increasing use of the term empowerment has occurred in the second half of the twentieth century in the United States from the emancipatory movements related to the exercise of citizenship, such as the movement of blacks, women, and homosexuals and movements for the rights of the disabled person, it can be said that the empowerment theme is not new.

For Vasconcelos (2003) the theoretical framework on which the notion of empowerment is based is not new; it is an appropriation and re-elaboration of already existing traditions constituting a nonlinear, noncumulative, or progressive process. In this way, it constitutes dynamic arenas of conflict, relational, without clear distinctions, in a constant dialectic between instituting and instituted.

In this sense, it should be emphasized that empowerment is a polysemous, complex, and multifaceted concept (Barreto and Paula 2012; Baquero 2012; Kleba and Wendausen 2009; Vasconcelos 2003; Horochovski and Meirelles 2007; OAKLEY and CLAYTON 2003; Fonseca et al. 2017). Empowerment is a multidimensional variable, with variable scope – ranging from individuals to the global sphere. Therefore, it cannot be generalized, as something that one absolutely has or not (Horochovski and Meirelles 2007).

According to Barreto and Paula (2012) in a broader way, one of the conceptualizations of empowerment refers to the phenomenon in which people come to have control over the resources, may they be physical or symbolic. However, in the face of a *neoliberal and neoconservative* perspective, physical resources frequently end up gaining more centrality, for there is a general notion that if poverty were to disengage, leaving the social risk situation by the material way is the path to empowerment. The authors question this notion by emphasizing the importance of the rescue of symbolic resources with regard to empowerment: "[...] the solution of the material problem of poverty does not avoid the condition of exclusion, but the subject in the situation of poverty that effectively empowers himself ceases positioning as an excluded" (Barreto and Paula 2012, p. 112).

Kleba and Wendausen (2009) point out that the use of the concept of empowerment based on the Anglo-Saxon tradition of civil and religious liberalism could serve as an instrument of greater control by some groups and/or institutions, which would condition the distribution of power to their corporate group interests. Then, for the authors, it is necessary to clarify the meaning that is intended to be attributed to this concept, identifying limits and possibilities related to its use.

In the opposite direction from the *neoliberal and neoconservative* perspective is the *Freirean perspective* that treats empowerment as reinforcement of a public space of transformation and emancipation of the dominated and excluded groups. Freire and Shor (2011) bring awareness of individual and social empowerment by advocating a process of participatory education in which people are not objects or recipients of

political education projects but actors in history, capable of naming their problems and solutions, to become the process of change. According to the authors:

> Even when you individually feel yourself most free, if is this feeling is not a social feeling, if you are note able to use your recent freedom to help others be free by transforming the totality of society, then you are exercising only a an individualist attitude towards empowerment or freedom [...] while individual empowerment, the feeling of being changed, is not enough concerning the transformation of the whole society, it is absolutely necessary for the process of social transformation. (Freire and Shor 2011, p. 135)

Fonseca et al. (2017) also point out that the fundamental matter is to understand the nature of the relationships established between empowerment and human development, in order to make feasible a socially fair proposal. In general terms, empowerment is interdependent and multidisciplinary, considering that, as a process, it refers to both the psychological, social, organizational, cultural, economic, and political dimensions. In this sense, social empowerment implies the development of the capacities of excluded people, to transform power relations that limit access and relations in general with the state, the market, and the society. However, it is fundamental to show that this process differs from the simple construction of skills and competences, since it refers to an emancipatory perspective. In this way, empowerment must be understood as a dialectical process, a struggle for rights and constant resistance against oppression and inequalities.

According to Wallerstein and Bernstein (1994, p. 142):

> Empowerment, or community empowerment, a preferred usage because of the social context in which empowerment takes place, thus embodies an interactive process of change, where institutions and communities become transformed as people who participate in changing them become transformed. Rather than pitting individuals against community and overall societal needs, the community empowerment construct focuses on both individual and community change.

Given the above, it is evident that the discussions about the conceptualization and practical approach related to the concept of empowerment

are complex and dynamic and involve social, political, historical, and economic factors. It is understood, in this work, that empowerment takes place in processes in which those involved empower themselves, so it cannot be provided nor realized for individuals or groups; empowerment is intrinsically related to social transformation.

This social transformation, which is so necessary and important from the point of view of empowerment, is also present when it comes to considerations about sustainability. Since the 1990s, the term empowerment has been generalized in its use, particularly by banks, multilateral and bilateral development agencies, governments, and nongovernmental organizations (Oakley and Clayton 2003), in the face of the growing need to adopt a sustainable development model, in accordance with the recommendations of the 2nd World Conference on Environment and Development held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro (Fonseca et al. 2017).

Nowadays, all the discussion about the socioenvironmental issue shows that an alternative for environmentally more balanced development should consider human society as part of the environment. "The very concept of sustainable development was born incorporating environmental sustainability into a social and economic sustainability" (Foladori 2002, p. 104).

The concept of sustainable development includes three basic dimensions: ecological sustainability, economic sustainability, and social sustainability. Among the three, the most controversial has always been social sustainability. However, over the last 30 years, social sustainability has evolved to emphasize the importance of social participation and the increase of the potentialities and qualities of people in the construction of a fairer future (Foladori 2002).

With regard to the issue of social participation in the discussion on social sustainability, it should be mentioned that it can be considered an indicator of democratic freedoms, equity in decisions, and also a key element in the enhancement of productive efforts. Since the 1980s, participation has been placed by international agencies, NGOs, and international institutions as a necessary goal for development and sustainability programs. In

fact, the concept of social participation has changed over time, from a simply informative participation to what is now known by the word empowerment, which assumes that participants in development projects discuss even the strategic guidelines themselves (Foladori 2002).

For the author it is clear that nowadays, the concept of participation associated with the idea of empowerment is what prevails, at least in discourse. There should be no doubt that this means a significant civilizational advance in the face of the earliest versions. However, empowerment itself signifies changes in the relations of ownership and appropriation present in the current system of production, that is, in the social relations of production. In this way, the distribution of social wealth does not change according to the rules of competition established by the market nor its consequences on social differentiation and poverty.

Romano (2002) also points out that the concept of empowerment has not only become fashionable, but also, and more damaging, has been appropriated as a way of legitimizing practices that are very diverse and not necessarily empowering, such as those proposed in the original terms.

> Thus, the empowerment invoked by multilateral and bilateral development banks and agencies, by various governments and also by NGOs, has often been used primarily as a legitimating tool for them to continue to do, in essence, what they used to do. Now with a new name: empowerment. Or to control, within the milestones established by them, the potential for changes originally printed in these categories and innovative proposals. (Romano 2002, p. 10)

In this sense, it is worth mentioning Villacorta and Rodrígues (2002) for whom sustainable development is one which purpose is the generation of wealth and well-being for present and future generations. For the authors, the search for sustainability is not only about generating wealth but also about the well-being of both present and future generations, so that sustainability cannot be reduced or made synonymous with economic growth, since, in addition to economic growth, it includes various dimensions or spheres of human life, such as political, social, cultural, environmental, space, spiritual, etc. Therefore, it

is a multidimensional phenomenon, which fundamental characteristic is the inclusion of all the forces and actors of a society.

A development that is exclusive, on the one hand, is poor development and, on the other hand, needs sustainability. Sustainable development implies, among other factors, a struggle to eradicate poverty and exclusion. It means that:

> [...] a development strategy is to ensure that sectors, groups and people living in poverty and extreme poverty, or who have been excluded and marginalized for various reasons such as gender, ethnicity or religion, are not only considered as objects of programs or strategies against poverty, but that, abandoning their status as excluded and marginalized, they become actors of their own development, participating in the fundamental decisions that drive it and the benefits it generates. (Villacorta and Rodrígues 2002, p. 46)

Thus, a key factor in moving toward sustainable development is the empowerment focus on poor and excluded sectors, groups, and people. In this sense, it is not by chance that historically, as mentioned earlier, the concept of empowerment was introduced in the 1960s and 1970s by the American Black movement, which fought discrimination against black minorities in the United States, and by feminist and women struggling to achieve women's full citizenship (Villacorta and Rodrígues 2002).

Oliveira and Freitas (2017) mention that female empowerment involves empowering women with social participation, ensuring that they are aware of the struggle for their rights, including gender equality. For the authors, the way the subjects make their choices is closely related to the participation capability but also to the power distribution in these spaces. Thus, women's empowerment relates to the women positioning in all social, political, and economic fields. The woman, by becoming aware and assuming her place and her individual power, also promotes the growth and strengthening of the role of all women in society. It is a dynamic process that involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects.

Considering the relationship between women's empowerment and sustainability, it is worth mentioning the Agenda 30 for sustainable

Empowerment in Sustainability, Table 1 Objective 5 from Agenda 30 for sustainable development

Objective 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere
5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation
5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation
5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate
5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life

Source: The authors based on United Nations (2015)

development, which came into force in January 2016. The document presents 17 objectives, successors of the 8 millennium development objectives, and 169 goals. These objectives are integrated and indivisible and, among other factors, seek to realize the human rights of all and achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, in order to balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental (United Nations 2015).

Agenda 30 considers that achieving human potential and sustainable development is not possible if for half of humanity, its full human rights continue to be denied. Thus, women and girls should enjoy equal access to quality education, economic resources, and political participation, as well as equal opportunities with men and boys in terms of employment, leadership, and decision-making at all levels. Objective 5 of the document specifically addresses gender equality and women's empowerment, as shown in Table 1:

In view of the Agenda 30 proposal, it is essential to mention that the reach of more egalitarian interpersonal relationships between men and women provides the design of human development in line with the environment in which they are inserted. The guarantee of this ideal is based on the substantial recognition of people, regardless of their representation as part of the masculine or feminine sign, that is, distanced from any differentiation in their rights (Carmo et al. 2016).

Equity understood as ensuring people's access to equal opportunities and the development of basic skills can guarantee environmental sustainability. In this context, barriers to women's economic and political opportunities must be removed and provide them access to education and basic services. It is based on the idea that equality in gender relations generates social sustainability and, therefore, environmental sustainability (Carmo et al. 2016).

Also at the international scope, the Paris Agreement, approved in 2015 by the 195 countries that took part of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the context of sustainable development, was another recent achievement for the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women. According to the document:

> Acknowledging that climate change is a common concern of humankind, parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity [...]. (Nações Unidas 2015, p. 2)

Even with initiatives such as the Agenda 30 for sustainable development and the Paris Agreement, which are based on the relationship of women's empowerment and sustainability, it is important to mention Calvelli et al. (2014) who emphasize the need to recognize that territorial development can only achieve sustainability if an integration process takes place, establishing equal opportunities and privileges and overcoming discrimination since the contribution of women to the functioning of society is unquestionable, which makes them decisive actors in this process.

Final Considerations

Sustainability is one of the great challenges of contemporary society. This process is complex and requires actions committed to the transformation of a production and consumption system that has generated significant socio-environmental problems while promoting social inequality.

The promotion of empowerment, discussed in this paper, can provide a disrupting perspective of socioeconomic development models that disseminate and increase the cycle of endemic poverty, high levels of social inequalities, and the alienation of basic civil rights (Oakley and Clayton 2003). In this way, the empowerment process can intervene in these imbalances and help increasing the power and participation of those groups that lack it, such as women.

In this sense, it is fundamental to promote and implement programs and public policies that include this approach in its basic structure. Empowerment implies the beginning of a broader process of conquest and exercise of citizenship as a mean and end for the constitution of human autonomy and for an equitable distribution of social and environmental well-being.

In this perspective, it can be said that women's empowerment and sustainability, while fundamental for human development, are still issues that need to be discussed and improved from a theoretical and practical point of view.

Women's empowerment is intertwined with sustainability, and since efforts to the environment must overlap any gender issue, it is extremely necessary for men and women to fight together and in equality to improve and create more sustainable practices that will ultimately guarantee life in Planet.

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